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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000055

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHWEST CHINA: INSTABILITY AND RESENTMENT IN TIBETAN AREAS
-- A SINGLE SPARK CAN LIGHT A PRAIRIE FIRE

REF: A. A) CHENGDU MARCH 14-26 DAILY UPDATES ON TIBET SITUATION (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. B) CHENGDU 43 C) CHENGDU 42

[1](#)C. D) 07 CHENGDU 239 E) 07 CHENGDU 13

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, U.S. Consulate
General, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: According to an influential Han Chinese businessman and patron of Buddhism in Chengdu, the Communist Party will likely have to purge many ethnic Tibetans from its ranks as they are sympathetic to the Dalai Lama. A high-ranking Tibetan administrator of a local university where student protests have occurred blamed at least some of the recent problems on incompetent and insensitive Han officials assigned to work in Tibetan areas. Even well prior to the recent outbreak of unrest, Post frequently noted during visits to the Tibetan Plateau the widespread local resentment caused by such officials and the policies they implement. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Approximately one week after protests spread through Tibetan areas of China, including western Sichuan Province where half of the country's ethnic Tibetans live, Congenoff had a rare opportunity to discuss the causes of the unrest over dinner with a high-ranking Tibetan administrator of Chengdu's Southwest Minorities University (strictly protect) and a well-known Han businessman, who is both a U.S. law school graduate and a Buddhist with many friends in the local Tibetan community. Southwest Minorities University has experienced at least two sit down protests by students, a few who reportedly held small signs calling for rights and democracy on March 16 (ref a).

Trying to Discuss What's Been Happening

[1](#)3. (C) According to the Han businessman, the Communist Party will likely have to purge many ethnic Tibetans from its ranks because they are sympathetic to the Dalai Lama. Congenoff noted some countries experiencing societal unrest have found it useful to form commissions to examine in-depth underlying causes, including cultural insensitivity and racism. Congenoff commented that prejudice towards minority groups is rarely acknowledged in Chinese society.

[1](#)4. (C) The Han businessman appeared to find the parallel intriguing. He turned to the Tibetan university administrator

and said, "What we need in China is a deep investigation of the social background to these riots. Not a whitewash by some party school academics, but a real honest examination of the problem."

15. (C) The Tibetan administrator was initially noncommittal. However, when Congenoff reminded him of Mao Zedong's famous quote, "a single spark can start a prairie fire," he conceded that incompetent and insensitive ethnic Han officials who do not understand Tibetan culture are part of the problem. Many Han officials in Tibetan areas, he asserted, serve for only brief periods of time and do not understand the local culture or the complexity of problems. The university administrator added that the conditions for a "prairie fire" could arise in China as in any other country when the government does not pay attention to local discontent.

Comments

16. (C) At an unusually frank academic conference entitled "Social Changes and Development in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and other Tibetan Areas" held in Chengdu in late 2006, a well known ethnic Tibetan official and academic noted publicly the large number of violent incidents that had been occurring in Tibetan areas of western Sichuan (ref e). He commented that, "public security authorities are ineffective mediators for political and historical reasons," and recommended that religious figures should be used by the Chinese Government to calm ethnic tensions. We have, however, found such openly expressed forward thinking to be rare. At the official level, inflammatory rhetoric like, "the Communist Party is the only true Buddha of the Tibetan People," is more the norm. During a March 11 dinner with CG (i.e., before the recent outbreak of violence), Sichuan Province Public Security Bureau Director Zeng Quansheng became so angry when discussing Tibetan-related issues that he had to leave the table to compose himself.

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17. (C) Well prior to the March 14 outbreak of unrest in Lhasa we were often struck by the open resentment voiced by a broad spectrum of ethnic Tibetans (not just Buddhist monks) towards Han Chinese and the apparent insensitivity of many Han officials to the problems and grievances of Tibetans. During a joint Consulate/Beijing visit to Lhasa in late February to gauge societal pressures from the new railroad and Han and Muslim Hui in-migration (ref b), two relatively well-to-do ethnic Tibetan university students were quite vocal about their hostility to "Chinese" (ref c). In addition to unhappiness that Han or Hui control most businesses throughout the Tibetan Plateau, we have also heard complaints about the kinds of businesses Hans bring. Garish looking Han-run massage parlors, for example, have been situated right next to some of the holiest sites of Tibetan Buddhism, including the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa and Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse.

18. (C) Although perhaps an extreme example of "Han Chauvinism," a "Help Tibet" cadre sent to work in Lhasa by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and who accompanied us on a trip to western Tibet in September 2007 bullied his ethnic Tibetan assistants, making them stay up late with him to drink and gamble (ref d). At one point during the trip, this official threw an empty bottle from our car at a passerby noting that Tibetans are poor and need to "make money from recycling." An ethnic Tibetan official complained bitterly to our Tibetan LES about the behavior of the "Help Tibet" cadre. The resentment seems to cut both ways. On an earlier Consulate trip to central Tibet, that same ethnic Tibetan official once refused to let our car stop to assist stranded Chinese tourists. The tourists were "only Han," the official said while ordering our car forward.

19. (C) This is not to say of course that all Han Chinese officials in Tibetan areas we have met are ethnically insensitive or that all ethnic Tibetans we encounter are

inherently hostile to the Chinese government. A number of foreign NGO workers and ethnic Tibetans have told us they have worked with Han officials who at least try to "do the right thing." However, as an ethnic Tibetan academic in western Sichuan's Ganzi Prefecture recently emphasized to us, strict political and security policies in Tibetan areas are dictated by Beijing and local officials (both Han and Tibetan) have little say in how such overly-blunt measures are implemented.

BOUGHNER